The late summer of 2009 was a bad period, at least symbolically, on the American anger front. A television host preempted an awards ceremony with an ill-tempered (and lengthy) outburst. A tennis star excoriated and threatened a hapless line judge. A representative shouted “You lie!” at the President of the United States on the floor of Congress. More broadly, “town hall” discussions of health care reform frequently degenerated into passionate shouting matches and sometimes outright violence, with one participant having his little finger bitten off after he punched an opponent.

Standard interpretation: there we go again. An American Studies professor is quickly quoted to the effect that the American people have always been coarse. A host of experts are ready to tell us how angry we are and how we need to learn more self-control—just think of the epidemic of road rage. But the actual story is more complicated. It may prove equally troubling, but it differs markedly from the conventional national self-portrait and probably also from the ways foreigners, accustomed to Hollywood violence and American military assertion, think of us as well.

The fact is that many Americans have been involved in a concerted effort to control anger, particularly in work and family life, but also in politics, for several decades now. Many participate unknowingly, often convinced that national anger constraints are inadequate, but participate they do. The results have been considerable in many venues. But the results are also incomplete. The real danger is not too much anger overall, but marked disproportions in who is authorized to get angry amid the widespread effort to restrain it. And that, in part, was what was showing up in the angry summer of 2009.

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Changing the Anger Standards

American standard-setters—the people who wrote about family or work life, for example—in the nineteenth century placed a positive value on anger in certain circumstances, primarily for men (respectable women were not supposed to be angry). A good middle-class man was to shun anger in the bosom of his family, and new attempts sought to curb the use of anger against children. But the capacity for anger as a spur to business competition or as a motive against injustice was a vital male attribute, and a new word, “sissy,” denoted the kind of person who could not muster up appropriate outrage. As in the classic Western drama, the good man was slow to anger but implacable when legitimately roused.

This complicated formula began to come undone by the 1920s—the decade that, in many emotional categories, launched trends that we still live with today. Amid growing suspicion of undue emotional intensity in general, particular attention began to be paid to new methods of controlling anger. The key motivation here was economic, with three overlapping sources. First, amid growing concerns about labor unrest, personnel experts, drawn increasingly from the ranks of industrial psychologists, sought methods to convince workers that anger was wrong and that workplace grievances should be avoided if possible and handled calmly if they occurred at all. Second, it was thought that an increasingly managerial and service-oriented economy would function better if people kept their tempers, and with women gradually seeping into the white collar workforce, anger had the additional drawback of making these new recruits likely to cry (the problem of women’s tears was a not-inconsiderable employment topic during these transitional years). And third, now that more economic activity depended on selling people goods that they might not actually need, it was argued that persuasive salespeople were those who rose above customer complaints and presented a smiling face at all times. Dale Carnegie, who became a tireless advocate of salesmanship training, put the point directly: customers might get surly, but salespeople should not reply in kind:

I had the satisfaction of controlling my temper, the satisfaction of returning kindness for an insult. I got infinitely more real fun out of making her like me than I ever could have gotten out of letting her go and take a jump.¹

An interesting contrast opened up between American rules for customer service and those developing concurrently in the Soviet Union. Soviet managers in the state-run GUM department stores, for example, emphasized worker over customer rights, and so placed no real emphasis on cheerful response. Much later, when McDonald’s opened in a transitional Russia, considerable effort was needed to train workers to keep smiling.

Quite widely in the United States, from the 1920s onward and in various work settings, a host of new devices were introduced to restrain anger on the job. Foremen, once notorious for bullying their charges, were now taught to keep their emotions in check.
check. At the same time, they learned that if they could get a worker to repeat a grievance two or three times, anger would often melt into embarrassment, and the whole situation would be defused. Secretaries, increasingly female, were told that anyone with a quick temper “faced the problem of remedying this defect.” Department store clerks were schooled in turning a cheerful check to customer complaints. Praise now went to those who could keep control: as a 1943 personnel article put it, “it is of the utmost importance that the foremen remain cool.”

By this point—the middle of the century—the new anger advice was spilling over into family literature. Revealingly, index listings in the most popular childrearing manuals began to cite “aggression” rather than anger, a clear indication that distinctions between outrage and unacceptable vehemence were eroding. The old advice to boys, about learning when to keep anger in check while not losing the capacity, was replaced by more uniform constraints. Classic ploys to teach boys to channel but utilize anger, like boxing, began to disappear from acceptable middle-class practice. Childish anger was now likened to “possession by the devil,” and a good parent must now actively help the child root it out.

Anger, in fact, now became infantile, a sign of insecurity. “For anyone to pout, sulk, rage, or indulge in other displays of violent emotion is to confess frustration and inability to face the actual problem.” Teenage advice books chimed in: “do you try to prevent outbursts of anger and thoughtless remarks?” Anger, in the new view, inevitably produced resistance and more confrontation; it was never useful, and often quite dangerous. Discussion of degrees of outrage was now irrelevant: the whole emotion was suspect. Anger in children was to be replaced by feelings “more socially useful and personally comfortable.” Children were to be taught to verbalize anger, rather than bottle it up, but then carefully to get rid of it without any behavioral manifestation. The good child was now learning to be a docile adult: rules encountered at any stage of life might not always be pleasant, “but we cannot break them or have temper tantrums because they do not suit us personally.”

Marriage manuals, finally, followed suit, urging that couples learn how to accommodate disagreements without angry conflict. A whole literature on “fair fighting” emerged in the 1960s, with spouses urged to shout hollowly in the closet when they faced emotions that might spill over. And if a spouse did become angry, his partner was urged to remember that this was just a sign of insecurity, not something that must be taken seriously. The guilty party, inevitably, was the person who became angry, not the person or situation that provoked it.

Thus, by the second half of the twentieth century, a range of standards existed urging that anger be kept under wraps. With rare exceptions—for example, a family manual for African Americans that allowed the legitimacy of anger against racial injustice—no good use for anger was found at all in the prescriptive literature that predominated for the growing American middle class.

Since then, the efforts against anger have solidified and ramified in a number of ways, often with measurable impacts on American behaviors. Training efforts for middle
management have continued, though under a variety of faddish labels. Total Quality Management, popular in the 1990s, emphasized “interactive skills” training that avoided provoking others, with specific injunctions against “Defending/Attacking behavior,” seen as “making personal attacks, moving away from issues, and becoming emotional.” Temper control was a core ingredient of the whole movement. Anger control moved more clearly into the classroom. Teachers who voiced anger against students or even used strident criticism were subject to rebuke. Emphasis rested increasingly on appealing to student self-esteem, rather than using emotions now seen as entirely negative.

Intriguing campaigns attempted to persuade Americans that they were angrier than they actually were. Again in the 1990s, the identification of “road rage” involved personality tests designed to make drivers worry that even moderately annoyed behavior—the occasional car honk—was a sign of incipient aggression. In point of fact, anger on the roadways was no greater than before, and indeed traffic-derived shootings had been more of a problem a decade prior. But well-meaning officials were constantly eager to find new ways to persuade Americans to keep their tempers in check, whether the problem was real or imagined.

The overall program spilled over into law and politics. In law, the rise of the no-fault divorce movement represented an attempt, among other things, to reduce emotional tensions, including anger, around the breakup of marriage and to provide an opportunity to arrange marital termination without angry discord. In politics, new rituals emerged designed among other things to test candidates’ capacity for temper control. Presidential debates sometimes featured provocative questions, with candidates fully aware that a display of temper in response would symbolize emotional unreliability. Plenty of hot-tempered candidates still hit the trails, but at the national level their emotional frailties were kept carefully under wraps. Smiles, not outrage, were the emotional coinage of politics. The same held for political appointees. Robert Reich, coming to Washington as Bill Clinton’s secretary of labor, was earnestly advised that at all costs he should avoid any sign of anger, which would be seized upon as a fatal weakness. Reasonably systematic anger control and emotional maturity were fully identified.
Larger data sets also suggested the impact of anger control. A comparative study, juxtaposing the United States with Greece, Jamaica, China, and several other cases, revealed Americans as particularly likely to wish to conceal any anger. Chinese, despite remnants of Confucian decorum, were noticeably more comfortable in identifying some positive functions for anger.\(^6\)

The campaigns against anger, certainly in terms of personnel management and possibly as a result of altered socialization as well, spilled over into the protest arena. The massive decline of labor strikes and union activities from the 1950s onward (with a brief new spike in the later 1960s) followed from changes in the labor force and location of industry, but the new sense that overt anger was an inappropriate tool may well have been involved. Trade unions picked up the message directly: a United Auto Workers pamphlet was urging, as early as the 1940s, that “a lost temper means a lost argument.”\(^7\) Calm negotiation might still win gains, but the glory days of fiery leadership seemed to have passed. Another component here involved the more careful behavior of foremen themselves; as personal grievances on the job noticeably declined, greater care was being taken to avoid generating, as well as expressing, anger, even if other aspects of labor conditions actually deteriorated. New protest movements often picked up notes of caution about anger as well, lest their efforts seem irresponsible or immature. Feminist leaders were eager to train women in greater assertiveness, but they went to some lengths to distinguish this from anger. Youth protesters in the 1960s, though often angry in fact, operated under mantras urging love, not conflict.

Even marriage, many experts argued by the 1970s, reflected the new signals in odd, sometimes counterproductive ways. Many marriage authorities contended that anger had become a problem not so much in direct fights, as in spousal embarrassment at their own inappropriate emotion. Temper problems began to escalate in complaints about spousal character flaws, but there was more. As one expert put it, “their [the spouses’] problem isn’t that they are angry with each other; it’s that they think they should not be angry with each other.”\(^8\) Anger control could create some complex adjustment problems, beginning with self-evaluation.

On another front, though a bit more speculative, a number of observers have argued that the growing acceptability of cursing in later-twentieth-century America reflected the increasing confidence that the words did not contain much if any real anger. They provided minor relief at most, not any serious threat of aggression, because all parties could trust each other that basic control standards still applied.

Anger control could go so far as to create real confusion about one’s own authentic emotions. Arlie Hochschild’s famous study of emotional training on the job—*The Managed Heart*—showed how flight attendants, carefully schooled in smiling reactions to passenger complaints, often lost the capacity, even in their free time, to figure out whether they were...
really angry or not. Meanwhile personnel tests were increasingly honed to help identify angry, and therefore unacceptable, job candidates—another reason for young people and parents to redouble their effort to prevent anger, or its open expression, in the first place.

Finally—though measuring cognitive discomfort is inherently unsystematic—training in anger avoidance or concealment made many people more vulnerable to unease, even outright distress, when they encountered anger nevertheless. Anger in the family could thus cause tremendous upset simply because it seemed both unwarranted and unfamiliar. The following quotations from family members encountering anger make the point clearly: “I’d get so upset, I’d throw up and not be able to eat.” “When she comes after me like that, yapping like that, she might as well be hitting me with a bat.” 9 At least in many quarters, there was little joy either in giving or receiving this classic emotion.

The American movement against anger, a clear innovation compared to late-nineteenth-century norms, thus operated over several decades, with diverse manifestations and significant impact, from new goals in children’s socialization to new behaviors in public as well as on the job. The movement was, furthermore, perpetually reinforced by real or imagined signs that American anger was veering out of control. Books were written in the 1990s and after claiming that unrestrained anger was the nation’s leading emotional problem. The authors expressed sincere belief, and their passion helped convince many already converted Americans that they must redouble their efforts—but their judgment was certainly oversimplified, and probably simply wrong. Contemporary American discomfort with anger, in self and others, ran quite high.

Gaps in Anger Control

There were, however, important gaps and blind spots in the anger control campaigns. The real national problems related to anger rested not in lack of vigor or impact, but in the gaps, and this is why confusion about the whole effort not only exists but flourishes. The movement against anger is still relatively new and far from entirely systematic, and important groups—quite apart from individual personalities—maintain rather distinctive subcultures, at some distance from the widespread pressure to keep the fires of emotion banked.

In politics, for example, the importance of restraining direct expressions of anger, which was very real, warred against other factors. Symbolism argued for maintaining a cheerful demeanor, but it was also important not to appear emotionally cold. Presidential candidate Michael Dukakis’s response to a question about his reactions to the hypothetical rape of his wife, in the 1988 Presidential campaign, was too rational, insufficiently passionate, and he lost points on the public’s complicated emotional balance sheet. Control of personal anger, moreover, coexisted with increasing efforts at negative campaigning: angry attacks against opponents were just fine so long as they did not emanate from angry outbursts by candidates themselves. Furthermore the stricture against anger...
also did not clearly apply to foreign targets. Deep anger against real or imagined foreign enemies often contrasted with domestic calm, and at times it might influence not only policy presentation but policy itself.

The very success of anger control efforts brought many people to seek other symbolic outlets, where they could witness expressions of anger that they could not venture in ordinary life. The huge popularity of aggressive sports in the United States surely owed much to their service in representing and so (usually) relieving angry emotion. Baseball provided throwback anger, the manager and the referee locked in chest-to-chest expressions of rage. Football and hockey loosened the constraints still further, both in physical aggression and in angry “trash talk,” allowing spectators to vent their own emotions in the comfort of an anonymous crowd. As one fan put it,

I could whoop and holler my guts out and nobody would think I was nuts…. I mean, it really helps you, brother, to reach down to your toes and pull out a yell you been keepin’ bottled up inside you for Christ knows how long.10

Angry confrontations in film and television drama also provided surrogate experience, all the more meaningful in that they contrasted with what many viewers permitted themselves in the daily routine. Here, indeed, was one source of the real confusion about anger in American life: it was very present but more in fiction than fact, more as spectator outlet than as accepted emotional tool.

Probably related to this was the fact that there were a few interesting exceptions to normal American intolerance of anger, even where young people were concerned. Though there was great variety, some arts directors could use anger as a means of discipline and motivation, even in school music groups, in ways ordinary teachers could not possibly get by with. Coaches, even more widely, used anger routinely, and their charges not only accepted this (usually) but actually expected it. A group of school oarsmen thus complained about a new coxswain:

“she keeps trying to praise us, but she’s supposed to be yelling and chewing us out.”11 It was not surprising, in this context, that efforts to keep aggression in check with sports rules often broke down and that some individual athletes did not quite master the level of temper control the society around them usually expected.

Two other anomalies, however, stand out even further in the complexity, and even the exceptionalism, of their relationship to the larger social standards. First, anger can still be used, and is actively used, within the power structure to manipulate the prescriptive culture. Second, important subgroups have rejected or bypassed the efforts against anger, and their contrast with other expectations has clearly become not only confusing but politically significant.

The first point is quickly sketched: many anger management programs in the workplace carefully bypassed top executives. Obviously, on the way up most business leaders needed to keep a lid on and project a superficially laid back style, but once in power they might well decide that emotional rules did not apply to them. Many a
AnGER  MAnAGEMEnT , AMERICAn-STYLE  / STEARnS

corporate or even university leader, cheerfully organizing anger control seminars that were obligatory for subordinates, freely used anger, even publicly, to discipline and embarrass these same subordinates. Emotional differentiation hardly caused the power structure in the United States—and angry styles did not characterize the leading groups uniformly. But manipulations of anger, against middle managers for whom the emotion could be quite disconcerting, could help maintain hierarchical imbalances. Here was a clear source of pressure on the middle executive group: pressed to be sane and carefully balanced in dealing with complaints from below, they could be pressed from above by emotional outbursts that were at once unfair and unassailable. Around 1990 a new term was introduced to label and, possibly, justify this kind of rage from on high. Leaders, in this case including the then-President Bush, were noted as “going ballistic.” Here was a way to describe and use a kind of rage that was denied to most people, and at the same time to legitimize it at the heights of power in contrast to more normal standards. Emotional imbalance as a factor in American power hierarchies is a topic worth further attention.

A few professional categories, as well, still seem to display an unusual openness to expressions of anger. Coaches (though not uniformly) have already been mentioned. Within medical ranks, surgeons stereotypically carry a reputation for self-indulgence in outbursts. Another exception, far larger and quite probably more important, involves a set of interrelated subcultures that simply ignore or reject the anger control movements. From the 1970s onward, anger on the farther political right began to replace more traditional sources of anger from the left, as the lessons so-called liberals were learning about emotional management simply fell on deaf ears on the other side of the public aisle.

Historians have long since recognized that, alongside the procession of emotional cultures that emerged in the American middle classes from the late eighteenth century onward, a persistent strand of Evangelical Christianity stood apart. Anger was one of the key differentiators. From their colonial roots onward, Evangelicals have developed an ambivalent stance on anger. Anger is to be suppressed in the sight of
God, and overt childish anger is a sign of sin. Rigorous discipline manages to keep anger at bay in the family as well as in relationship to the religious hierarchy, but the same process actually encourages anger, and angry intolerance, against outside targets. At various points over the past two hundred-plus years, Evangelical anger against unbelievers variously defined has poured forth as an earthly vessel for the wrath of God, all the more powerful as it channels emotions that cannot be expressed in other contexts, from childhood onward.

This longstanding Evangelical current was fueled by a wider anger in some quarters, after the 1960s, over growing evidence of national moral lapse and by a rising sense of a loss of control over public culture and, ultimately, global influences alike. Any emotion was legitimate in protesting the downward slide. The legalization of abortion attracted much of the new rage, but pornography, homosexuality, immigration—all the targets of the so-called conservative social agenda—were available as well. Unchained anger and vituperation dominated the new genre of the rightwing talk show, and it stood in vivid contrast to the emotional rules many other Americans were internalizing at least in part.

The result has been not only an interesting, but also a significant and troubling cleavage in public culture and political life. Norms governing American emotional expression have in most respects become increasingly restrictive in recent decades, even though the wider public thinks of contemporary national culture as unrepressed. Aversion to emotional intensity, stricter definitions of maturity, complicated “rules” that combine informality and verbal license with the need to keep emotions like anger in strict check have made serious inroads as part of middle-class life.

Seen in and of itself, this trend has the usual mixture of plusses and minuses. More people in more situations can count on relatively anger-free experiences than was true, say, a century ago. This includes students in college and many high school classes, clerical workers (who can complain about a hostile work environment if there’s too much anger around), and, of course, customers in most situations. The emotional repression involved, however, may sometimes be excessive: other than watching other people be angry, for example, on the ball field, or taking expert advice and shouting futilely in the closet, there aren’t many legitimate outlets. Some people, unable to deploy controlled doses of anger, may burst out more vehemently, in certain circumstances, than they would have otherwise. The unwillingness to encourage modulated anger may contribute to a socially undesirable diminution of protest. There’s food for thought, in other words, about the consequences of this particular emotional style—as is true with any style.

The more serious issues, however, relate to the cultural divisions that the style has not healed. The self-authorization of some groups to spew out their righteous wrath leaves the other segments, taught to be uncomfortable with their own anger or that of others, inadequately prepared to defend themselves. The problem applies to uses of anger in management hierarchies or in political disputes, and it risks serious distortion of public life.

Faced with outbursts like those of the summer of 2009, many Americans will revert to the notion that we’re simply an angry society, in some cases trying to ratchet up their own levels of self-control in the process. This approach misstates the main problem.
We are certainly fascinated by anger, but more because so many try to meet constrain-
ing social norms than because we suffer from a national orgy of indulgence. What is true is that an important transition toward defusing anger remains incomplete and in certain specific cases undesirably unbalanced. Anger has moved into certain pockets of American life, where it is arguably abused and inadequately disciplined. Identifying the imbalance does not resolve it, but at least a more accurate diagnosis opens the way for a discussion of countermeasures—which could, ironically, encourage more training in uses as well as abuses of anger, not less.

Endnotes

11 Conversations with student athletes at George Mason University, Fall semester, 2009.